

COUNSELOR CONNECTION

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CITY OF MERCER ISLAND
YOUTH & FAMILY SERVICES

WARM WINTER WISHES

With one trimester already completed for the year, school days are ticking by as we move into our second trimester. In this edition of our Counselor Connection newsletter we wanted to share some reminders about all the challenges that our adolescent student population are dealing with on a daily basis. As we all know, being a teenager can be really hard and there are changes at every turn. With that said, we have some suggestions for ways to reflect on the past trimester, plan ahead for the new one, all while supporting your student's resilience. As the weather turns and we move towards the winter months, we wish you all the best for a safe, healthy and peaceful season.



NEW TRIMESTER, NEW BEGINNING

Now that trimester one has come to an end, it is a great time to do some reflection on the trimester past and thoughtfully plan for the trimester ahead. Students tend to benefit from some self-reflection. Some great conversation starters include: What went well for you in this first trimester? What do you think you could improve upon? By leaving the questions open for discussion, hopefully your student can spend some time thinking about what changes they could make as we move forward into a new learning and grading period.

A method for goal setting that works well with students is something called a "Smart Goal." Smart goals are those that are:

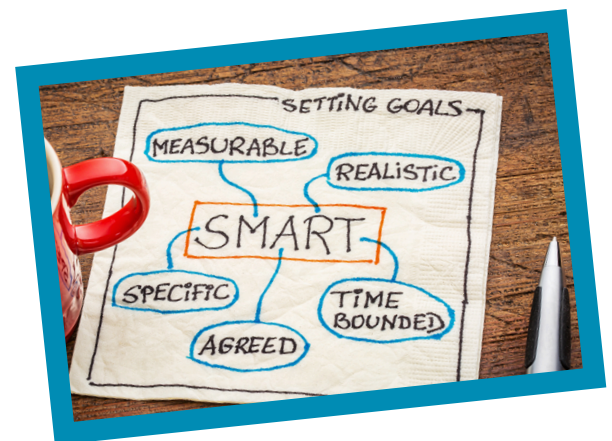
S (Specific)- What will be accomplished? What actions will you take?

M (Measurable)- What data will measure the goal? How much? How well?

A (Attainable)- To ensure that a goal is attainable, a student should be able to specify how they will achieve the goal.

R (Relevant)- How does the goal align with broader goals? Why is the result important?

T (Time-Bound)- What is the time frame for accomplishing the goal?



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As adults, most of us do not look back at our teenage years fondly. Most of us remember being awkward and insecure. We wanted to share a few reminders of all that our students are going through and learning, so hopefully we can offer them grace and understanding.

Self Awareness

Pre-teens/teens are experiencing their bodies and brains undergo a full reconstruction along with their identity. This reconstruction process can make them feel highly vulnerable and sensitive and they may require more privacy in their own space as they wrestle with understanding the changes they are undergoing.

Social Awareness

Pre-teens/teens become highly aware of others' perceptions of them. This is evidence of their effort to grow their empathy and perspective-taking skills, but they may over-index on their perceptions of peer judgment. As social awareness grows and develops, so too does social anxiety.

Self-Management

Because pre-teens/teens are highly competent and can be trusted more on their own, they also tend to push away from parents to show their independence. This can take the form of judgments or criticisms or attempting to stay away from them. Because of their body and brain changes, they can experience wide mood swings and lack the understanding or coping strategies to help them manage those big feelings. Peer opinion also becomes a major factor in their opinions, interests and choices.

Relationship Skills

Pre-teens/teens are viewing their friends and peers in a whole new light. Connection and belonging to peers is not just a nice-to-have, it's necessary to survive in school. Yet, peers can smell desperation. So middle schoolers know they must hide if they can, their vulnerabilities, including crushes. They feel the heat of the magnetizing pull to their peers while they push away and attempt to appear cool.

Responsible Decision-making

Pre-teens/teens are experiencing a raw blend of mood swings, strong peer influence, a desire for instant gratification and a lack of consequential thinking, a higher order thinking skill that doesn't fully come online in the brain until the mid-twenties.

Miller, J.S. (2019). Confident Parents, Confident Kids: Raising Emotional Intelligence in Ourselves and Our Kids — From Toddlers to Teenagers. Beverly, MA: Quarto, Fair Winds Press.

RESILIENCE & THE PRODUCTIVE STRUGGLE

Parents want the best for their children. They want their kids to be happy and the typical definition of happiness does not include distress. However, what we sometimes forget to consider is that despite wanting happiness for kids, life is hard. Kids will face challenges and these challenges provide opportunities to learn resilience. With resilience comes confidence and an increased chance of happiness as kids learn that life is what we make it.

Are you unintentionally accommodating your child? Accommodation is any change a parent makes to their own behavior to help kids avoid/lessen anxiety. Typically, these changes come from a caring and loving place. In actuality, accommodation often inadvertently teaches kids that they cannot face their anxieties and challenges and they need others to step in to fix their problems. **Productive struggle** is actually an important part of the learning process. It builds perseverance and the ability for kids to grapple with a problem and learn to resolve it while developing independent problem solving and thinking skills. Don't be afraid to let your child wrestle a bit with learning something new. Remember success breeds success. If they are successful in the moment of struggle, they will be much more likely to take a risk next time they encounter a challenge.